

# Producing Prescription Labels for Individuals with Limited English Proficiency

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**Background.** The St. Paul-Ramsey Medical Center provides medical services to approximately 300 patients per month with limited English proficiency. To support these patient encounters, the medical center employs nine language interpreters proficient in Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Additional languages are available by telephone through commercial interpreter resources.

If a medication prescription is written, the interpreter reviews and translates the medication instructions for the patient. The instruction label attached to the medication container, however, is in English. The lack of a practical method to produce a printed label in the preferred language of the patient was a concern from both safety and patient satisfaction perspectives. As a result of these concerns, a software application was developed that automated the production of a medication label that contained both the English and translated versions of the medication instruction.

**System.** The medical center language interpreters translated 700 standard English pharmacy instructions into Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. The indexed list of translated instructions matches the list of standard instructions used by the pharmacy technicians to produce the label normally attached to the medication container.

The list of translated instructions serves as the data source for a Microsoft Word application that prints medication instruction labels.

The pharmacy technician selects one of the instructions from the list and also selects the desired language translation. An auxiliary label is then produced that can be attached directly to the medication container. The label includes an English version of the instruction, the translation language, the instruction index and the translated instruction in the appropriate language font.

**Quality Assurance.** Medication compliance is difficult to achieve under the best circumstances. A variety of methods have been developed to promote appropriate use of prescribed medications, but one of the fundamental presumptions is that the medication container provides the necessary information for proper use of the medication. Patients using medications inappropriately are exposed to risks of reduced efficacy and direct toxicity. The large number of people in this community with limited English proficiency makes it essential that a practical method be available to provide written instructions on medication containers that are in a language the patient can understand.

**Future Enhancements.** Currently, the medication instruction translations are limited to six languages and to the specific method for using the medication (e.g., take one tablet at bedtime). Translation of detailed drug information, including expected side effects and safety warnings, should also be available and additional language translation will be undertaken when sufficient support can be obtained to fund this activity.